

When in our Music God is Glorified

A Thanksgiving meditation based on several Psalms

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Once upon a time a minister and a song leader worked together in a church, but they didn't see eye to eye, and with time their little power struggle began to spill over into the worship services. One Sunday the minister preached on commitment, stressing that we should dedicate all that we are and have to the service of God, but when the sermon ended, the song leader asked the congregation to sing, "I Shall not be Moved!"

The minister preached on tithing the following Sunday, encouraging the congregation to give generously, even sacrificially, over and above their usual contribution. When the preaching subsided, the song leader responded by inviting the congregation to sing the hymn, "Jesus Paid it All."

The following Sunday the minister spoke on gossip, admonishing the congregation to watch their tongues and to think twice about spreading idle stories! Whereupon the song leader asked the congregation to sing, "I Love to Tell the Story."

Growing rather tired of the song leader's sabotage, the minister told the congregation at the conclusion of his next sermon that he was considering resigning! The song leader invited the congregation to respond with the hymn, "Oh, Why Not Tonight?"

Fearing that the song leader would stop at nothing, the minister informed his congregation the following Sunday that the Lord was leading him elsewhere. He was confident that Jesus had other plans for him. Whereupon the song leader asked the congregation to sing, "What A Friend We Have in Jesus."

The Powerful and Positive Impact of Music

This week I received a letter from a business – I presume a business – called "Positive Impact Music". I cannot imagine music having a negative impact. Music can be used in a negative way, as did the devious song leader I described. It can be used to manipulate, perhaps even to grate on the senses, but if a composer produces music that grates, perhaps musicality is not the first thing on his or her mind! Music can express emotions with a negative tone, but even that music – the blues, for example – I find exceptionally moving!

Music has always had a positive impact on me. And I was particularly conscious of it this week, starting a week ago, Saturday, when at Derek and Aimee's wedding a mixed quartet, including our own Steve Driediger, sang a haunting version of "Will You Let me Be your Servant?" Then, for the recession, the pianist that arranged – or re-arranged – the "Servant Song" improvised a jazz-like piece on the piano that had me begging him to consider moving to Ottawa.

On Sunday our own choir sang two beautiful anthems during the communion service. And then, on Tuesday, at the televised state funeral – a Christian service, I dare say,

that temporarily sent secularists into hiding – the choir anthems and organ pieces were incredibly moving and wonderful!

I can remember other musical experiences that have had a great impact on me. This summer we visited a Hutterite colony in Alberta, and after our group shared supper with them they sang several songs for us. Their musical tradition is a unique one, and the haunting sound of their communal chorus moved us to tears!

I remember hearing Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" for the first time when I was ten, and feeling shivers go through me. Our family visited southern Africa twelve years ago, and while it was a great educational experience for all of us, all of the things I learned paled in comparison to the singing of the African Independent Churches. A small, unaccompanied group would start up a chorus of haunting harmonies and intricate rhythms that also sent shivers up and down my spine. I recall too a night in Tanzania when a small group of us spent hours singing through our hymnal, singing and weeping through hymn after hymn after hymn.

Music's Suspicious Detractors

There are, of course, those who are suspicious of music mixed with piety. St Jerome (347-420), one of the church fathers, recommended singing to God with the heart more than the voice, feeling that the praise of the heart is too easily distracted by praise of the voice. St Augustine (354-430), no less severe, pronounced music a "contentment of the flesh" and recommended that "the whole melody of sweet music" be "banished from (his) ears, and the Church's too!" St Thomas Aquinas (1225-74), whose treatises have had great influence upon the Church and upon philosophy, raised the question of whether God should be praised in song at all, given the instability of music. Pope John XXII issued a papal bull (1324-25) against polyphonic music, holding that "a person who is intrinsically sensuous will delight in hearing these indecent melodies, and one who listens to them frequently will be weakened thereby and lose his virility of soul."

The sixteenth century John Calvin (1509-64) asserted that singing is "not of the least consequence" unless it "proceeds from deep feelings in the heart." Indeed, if anything less prompts music, it "provokes the anger of God," he wrote. The sixteenth century Anabaptists downsized the musical elements of worship drastically, and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Puritans took it upon themselves to destroy church organs! It's not always easy to tell when Jonathan Swift's tongue is in his cheek, but in one of the books in his "Gulliver's Travels" series, musical instruments are reduced to ducks, sausages, puddings, and a breast of veal! (David Jeffrey, "A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature")

MUSIC'S CHAMPIONS These detractors notwithstanding, music is a powerful medium. It can express joy; it can convey infinite sadness; it can bring a tear to our eye, a shiver to our spine, and peace to our beleaguered souls. It brings comfort to the mournful, and stirs the lethargic.

History's pantheon of voices also includes music's champions, like the thirteenth century St Mechthild (1240-1298). She herself was gifted with a beautiful voice, so it's not surprising that she wrote:

“God plays upon the harp of the Spirit,
Sounding the strings strongest in love:
And to this mystical music
Humanity is beckoned to sing.”

Though sixteenth century reformers were generally a musically-challenged lot, Martin Luther (1483-1586) loved music, and showed a remarkable understanding of it. He wrote, “I truly desire that all Christians would love and regard as worthy the lovely gift of music... (for) next to the Word of God, the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in this world.” (1538)

If Luther wanted the Church to embrace the art of music, Charles Wesley did his utmost to see that the Church had a ready supply of sacred music. His lyrics and musical settings include 6500 hymns, about 500 of which are still in use in a variety of Christian traditions.

More importantly, however, music's champions are already evident early in the biblical story, for both string and wind instruments figure very early in the Scriptures. The Israelites had hardly emerged from the Red Sea when their leader Moses who complained to God that he had no speaking ability but who apparently had the gift of song led his people in a song of praise to the Lord for their redemption. (Exodus 15:1) Miriam joined in on this canticle of praise, taking a tambourine, and, leading all the women in dance, she sang, “Sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously!” (15:20-21)

The psalmist, of course, was a poet and a singer, and of all the Old Testament musicians, David, the most prominent, was well aware of music's enormous power. Indeed, his example and instruction (1 Chronicles 15:16-29) were also taken up by the leaders who followed in his wake, namely Solomon (e.g., 2 Chronicles 9:11), Hezekiah (2 Chronicles 29:25; 30:21), and Josiah (2 Chronicles 35:15).

If the Israelites sang God's praises when liberated from Egyptian slavery, they did so again when returning to Jerusalem from exile (Nehemiah 12:8). At the Dedication Service of the newly re-constructed city, they celebrated, the Old Testament tells us, “with rejoicing, with thanksgivings and with singing, with cymbals, harps, and lyres” (12:27), and with “trumpets”. (12:41) The singers “sang at the top of their voices,” we are told (12:42, TEV); indeed, it is said that on that day the “joy of Jerusalem was heard far away!” (12:43) It was their tradition, they explained, for from “the time of King David and the musician Asaph long ago ...musicians have led songs of praise and thanksgiving to God.” (12:46, TEV)

Music Magnifies God

Music, in the Scriptures, is often associated with praise and thanksgiving, and what better way to express our own worship at this harvest festival than to sing our praises and thanksgiving. There are many reasons to sing God's praises, but let me suggest just two reasons to do so before asking you to share the ways in which you've experienced music in the praise of God.

Firstly, singing God's praises is a good thing to do because it's magnifies God. In the psalms that Katie and Ghenette read to us, Psalm 8 praises the majesty of God: "O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is Your name in all the earth!" (8:9) Psalm 111, likewise, invites our praise of God when we assemble, for "Great are the works of the Lord.... Full of honour and majesty...." (111:2-3)

Psalm 92 declares that it is "good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to (His) name... ..to the music of the lute and the harp, to the melody of the lyre." (92:1 and 3) And all of the poetic and musical psalms end in a crescendo with Psalm 150, with all manner of musical instruments – trumpet, lute, harp, tambourine, strings, pipe and cymbals – joining in a swell of orchestral praise and thanksgiving!

Praise and thanksgiving are attractive to me, in part, because in our modern setting it's a fairly useless activity. In praising God we set aside all utilitarian goals, all efforts to identify moral purpose or worthwhile functions, and we assert, for a while at least, that our primary purpose in life is doxology and joy! In contrast to our pattern in secular life, and increasingly in church life too, a pattern that compels us to accomplish things, to achieve goals, to live useful lives, to invest wisely, and to carry on an unceasing array of programs to justify our existence, the sound of doxology frees us to do nothing but give glory to God! And music helps us to do that.

Songs of Thanksgiving Inspire Hope in Dire Circumstances

Secondly, it's good to sing songs of thanksgiving because they inspire hope in dire circumstances. Several years ago I saw the movie, "The Shawshank Redemption," a story about life in a very tough prison to which a fellow named Andy was sentenced to two life terms for crimes he did not commit. To combat the soul-destroying atmosphere at Shawshank, Andy wrote to the state legislature every week, requesting books for the prison library. One day a huge shipment of used books and long-playing records arrived at the warden's office. It was Andy's job to sort through these, and while doing so he put one of the records on the prison record player. As an aria from "The Marriage of Figaro" began to play, Andy, intoxicated by its beauty, decided to play it over the prison loudspeakers. Everyone in the prison was transfixed by the music, a moment of intrusive beauty in a horrible place. Upset at this flagrant disregard of the rules, the warden attempts to stop it, but Andy locks the warden and his guards out of the office until the aria comes to an end.

The aging Andy was punished and tortured for this offence, but when asked by his fellow inmates how he endured his cruel punishment, Andy explained, "I had Mr. Mozart to keep me company. It's in here," he said, pointing to his head and heart. "That's the beauty of music ... so you don't forget that there are places in the world not made out of stone, that there's something inside that they can't get to, that they can't touch."

As I mentioned earlier, when the Israelites escaped from slavery and oppression in Egypt, they had no sooner crossed the Red Sea than Moses started singing, and Miriam started dancing and playing the tambourine (Ex.15). Their praises and thanksgiving arose not out of material blessings, because they had nothing, but out of the realization that God had led them through a wilderness experience, and through His mighty power they had crossed over into freedom!

We sing God's praises because God is God. We sing God's praises whether or not we're happy! And we sing God's praises because we're free! And in the hymn that we're about to sing, "When in our Music God is Glorified," the ground of our hope and freedom, our redemption, is expressed in verse 4:

“And did not Jesus sing a psalm that night
when utmost evil strove against the Light?
Then let us sing, for whom he won the fight: alleluia!”
(Hymnal: A Worship Book, #44)

AMEN!

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.